**Principals and Formative Assessment**

1. The principal and other administrators need to articulate the importance and value of formative assessment. Developing the knowledge and skills needed for formative assessment will involve teachers in intellectually challenging work, and for many, significant changes in practice. Before they embark on this work, teachers need to know the school leadership is convinced of the value of formative assessment to student learning.
2. School leaders need to be clear that teachers will have support in this effort. Laying out some specific plans about how that support will be provided, or engaging teachers in a conversation about what kind of support would be needed, are ways the school leaders can signal their support from the outset.
3. Teachers need to know leaders will make findings the time for teachers to engage in PLCs a priority. The National Staff Development Council’s (NSCD) report on Professional Learning (Darling-Hammond et al., 2009) indicates that a significant amount of time is essential to develop new knowledge and skills. The NSCD report is clear that on-shot professional development efforts do not work. Moreover, even when professional development programs are sustained over six months to a year, those with between five and 14 hours total contact hours showed no statistically significant impact on student learning. To achieve statistical significance, there needed to be at least 30 hours of total professional development. Considering that most schools operate on a 10-month school year, this means approximately three hours per month at the very minimum need to be devoted to PLCs. So ensuring adequate time, both in terms of the duration of the project or focus, and adequate time on a week-to-week basis, is one of the most important roles administrators can play. From the evaluation of the PLC, other systemic issues may come to light. For example, meetings might have been scheduled at a particular time, but teachers might make clear that it would be easier to meet if each department had common planning periods. Perhaps the idea of early release or early close days to accommodate this schedule was raised during initial planning and rejected as being too difficult. Whatever issues are raised, the administrators’ role will be to evaluate decisions and explore ways of making it easier for teachers to meet together, even if it requires challenging old habits.
4. Administrators need to remove existing obstacles that cause teachers to use the time allocated for their PLC for other commitments. For example, depending on who is initially involved (if it is a schoolwide effort), some participating teachers may also be members of other committees, departments, or involved in other initiatives. Having competing demands may take much of their time, energy, and focus away from the PLC and formative assessment. In this instance, administrators will have to figure out how teachers’ time can be freed up so they can fully concentrate on developing formative assessment practices.
5. Where possible, school leaders should make connections to other efforts or initiative that are already under way to help teachers see the value in developing formative assessment skills rather than the work being seen as just another thing that is being added to their plate. For example, there may be connections to literacy-or mathematics-focused professional development that teachers have already been part of. Engaging some of those core teachers could be a useful way to build support for the new effort. Helping teachers see that they already are incorporating some aspects of formative assessment into their practice may increase enthusiasm for the idea of taking those ideas deeper and further, and help teachers see the new work as an extension of existing work. Furthermore, if some teachers have already experienced success with aspects of formative assessment in their classrooms, they can serve as school-based advocates and positive examples. When responding to skeptics who say “that won’t work in our school,” there is nothing as powerful as a peer who can talk about what they have done and how they have seen success.
6. School leaders must take strategic decisions about the allocation of resources to support the PLCs. For example, if teachers want to purchase materials for the PLC or need substitute cover to observe each other in classrooms, funds for this should be available.
7. Leaders should work to establish an atmosphere of risk taking and of learning from mistakes. When teachers are making significant changes to their practice, they need to know they won’t receive a poor evaluation when a lesson in which they took a risk goes awry. ‘to learn, students need to feel safe to make mistakes, and teachers must feel safe to do so too.
8. Administrators need to project attitudes of patience and commitment. They need to appreciate that changes to practice can be slow, and they need to make sure that everyone involved has realistic expectations of what can be accomplished by when.
9. School-based administrators must ensure sufficient communication with district administrators so that they understand what the school is trying to achieve. There may be resources within the district that the school can draw upon or there may be other schools working on similar goals. Sharing school-based successes within the wider district also provides encouragement for participating teachers.
10. Administrators need to realize they will also be learners. Formative assessment will likely be new for many administrators, and they need to feel comfortable in the knowledge that they do not have all the answers. Learning with teachers as partners, and ensuring that the teachers have the support they need, send crucial messages to teachers about the importance of their work in their PLC.
11. Administrators need to decide how they want to be learners with the teachers. Should they attend all the meetings, some of the meetings, or part of each meeting? In some cases, teachers might feel less comfortable sharing practice that did not go as well with administrators present. Administrators might consider attending the second part of a PLC meeting, the first half of the meeting would provide time for teachers to reflect on and share practices with the group, and the second half would include a more in-depth study of some formative assessment.
12. During classroom visits, an administrator should be alert to examples of formative assessment that have been incorporated into the teacher’s practice. These should be commented on and encouraged. A principal can use the elements of the process of formative assessment in Chapter 2 to structure questions about an observed lesson. When the principal or other administrators observe examples of good practice, they can be shared at other faculty meetings.
13. Administrators should modify formative and summative teacher evaluations to recognize formative assessment practice. For example, the edited book by Martinez-Miller and Cervone (2007) provides in-depth information about how classroom walk-throughs can be used by teachers and administrators. The focus is not on “fixing” what is not working, but on looking for examples of practice that are effective, and building from those.
14. Administrators need to communicate with parents about changes they can expect to see in the school as a result of implementing formative assessment. They must manage parents’ expectations so that teachers can focus their efforts on their practice. For example, if schoolwide policies on grading and giving feedback are established, these must be clearly communicated to parents with clear reasons for how this change will benefit learning.
15. Administrators should be sure to recognize progress and to celebrate successes along the way. This leads teachers to feel their efforts are both valued and appreciated.